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Special Report: Religion on Campus: Part One

Many Students Are Church Members, But Few Are Active

PRINCETON, N.J. — Two students in three entering or returning to the nation's college campuses this fall say they are church members, but only comparatively few will be active in campus religious organizations or will attend worship services weekly.

These findings and others are from an on-campus survey on the religious practices and beliefs of college undergraduates that are being released for the first time in this and the next three issues of **Emerging Trends**. This special survey was commissioned by the Princeton Religion Research Center, and was conducted in October 1988 by the Gallup Organization.

Membership in a church or synagogue is claimed by 67% of the college students (compared to 69% of the general adult population). Young women are more likely than young men to say they are church members, by a margin of 72% to 62%. There is a slight drop-off in membership between the lowerclassmen (68%) and upperclassmen (65%) years, but the difference is not statistically significant.

The greatest differences in church membership are regional, with students attending colleges in the South (76%) or Midwest (72%) being more likely to be members than those on campuses in the East (64%) or West (49%).

Catholic college students (80%) are just slightly more likely than Protestants (77%) to identify themselves as church members.

Membership, of course, does not always imply an active life in the church. Among undergraduate college students, only one in three (34%) reports attending religious services at least weekly. An additional 18% say they attend about monthly, but 25% attend only sporadically throughout the year, and 23% say they almost never attend worshp services. In recent years, Gallup Surveys have found that about 40% of adults in general attend worship services in any given week.

Young women in college are more likely than young men to be found attending services, by a margin of 39% to 30%. Attendance declines among upperclassmen (30%), in comparison to that of freshmen and sophomores (36%).

If campus chaplains find young worshippers to be unusually bright and articulate, it may be because "A" students (43%) are far more likely than "B" (32%) or "C" (35%) students to attend services weekly.

The habit of attending services weekly is much stronger among students at colleges in the South (43%) and Midwest (40%) than at those in the West (27%) or East (24%).

Only about one student in eight (12%) belongs to or participates in an on-campus religious organization or fellowship. Protestant students (14%) are slightly more likely than Catholic undergraduates (11%) to be engaged in these activities.

The campus organizations appear to have more widespread appeal on midwestern (17%) and eastern campuses (12%) than upon those in the South (9%) or West (8%). While the comparatively low showing for these activities in the South may appear to be surprisingly low, it should be remembered that southern students often are likely to participate in nearby off-campus religious activities.

The "gender gap" is narrower in campus religion groups, with women predominating by the narrow margin of 13% to 10% for male members. Upperclassmen and lowerclassmen are equally represented in the groups, but membership is skewed towards "A" students (14%).

The survey was conducted among a representative national sample of 545 undergraduate college students. Interviews were conducted in person on the campuses of 98 colleges and universities during the period of October 17-28, 1988. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects does not exceed plus or minus 6 percentage points.

NEXT MONTH: College students rate the importance of religious belief in their lives and report how their religious commitment has changed since entering college.

Frequency of Attending Religious Services

The Question: How often do you attend religious services?

	Weekly	About monthly	Few times a year	Almost never
	%	%	%	%
Total undergraduates	**34**	**18**	**25**	**23**
Gender				
Male	30	16	25	29
Female	39	20	24	17
Class				
Lowerclassmen	36	18	24	22
Upperclassmen	30	18	27	25
Grade point average				
A	43	8	20	29
B	32	20	27	21
C	35	21	18	26
Region				
East	24	18	34	24
Midwest	40	20	20	20
South	43	21	18	18
West	27	10	27	36
Religious affiliation				
Protestant	40	24	20	16
Catholic	37	18	31	14

Religious Affiliations

The Questions: Do you belong to or participate in the activities of a college organization associated with a religious denomination, such as Newman, Hillel, or Wesley?

Are you a member of a church or synagogue?

	Campus religious group member	Church/Synagogue member
	%	%
Total undergraduates	**12**	**67**
Gender		
Male	10	62
Female	13	72
Class		
Lowerclassmen	12	68
Upperclassmen	12	65
Grade point average		
A	14	64
B	10	66
C	10	65
Region		
East	12	64
Midwest	17	72
South	9	76
West	8	49
Religious affiliation		
Protestant	14	77
Catholic	11	80

Image of TV Evangelists Deteriorates, But Confidence in the Church Unchanged

As TV evangelist Jim Bakker's trial on charges of conspiracy and fraud unfolds, a new Gallup Poll finds public opinion of television evangelists in general at an all-time low. Several years of headlines reporting sexual and financial scandals involving some leading evangelical preachers such as Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart have taken their toll. Representing a dramatic turnaround of opinion during this decade, a large majority now believes television evangelists do not have a special relationship with God, and that they are uncaring, dishonest, insincere, and untrustworthy in dealing with money.

The multi-billion dollar electronic church's revenues and television ratings are most threatened by the fact that the largest decline in evangelists' image ratings has occurred among adults who are occasional viewers of religious broadcasting. A new Gallup Poll of 1,238 adults nationwide finds that this key group of marginally interested viewers is losing faith in television ministers at a faster rate than either non-viewers or weekly viewers.

TV Evangelists Not Trusted With Money

In 1980, when Gallup first started gauging the public's image of television evangelists, most Americans held positive views of the characteristics of TV ministers as a group. However, a 1987 Gallup Poll taken one month after Jim Bakker's resignation as head of the PTL ministry found sharp decreases in the numbers of adults describing television evangelists as caring, honest, sincere, trustworthy, and involved in a special relationship with God. The latest Gallup Poll finds that opinion of electronic preachers has continued to drop precipitously since Bakker's resignation. The declines registered between 1987 and 1989 are almost as sharp as those measured between 1980 and 1987.

Americans' leading complaint against television evangelists continues to be that they are not trustworthy with money. Nearly eight in ten (79%) say television evangelists cannot be trusted with their supporters' donations. In 1980, before the financial scandals and opulent lifestyles of certain popular televangelists were revealed, less than half as many (36%) were distrustful of evangelists' handling of funds. However, by 1987 a majority of the public (63%) already was expressing the view that TV ministers could not be trusted with money.

The growing cynicism in attitudes toward television ministers is equally apparent in ratings about their spiritual and personal characteristics. Large majorities now describe TV evangelists as dishonest (70%), insincere (67%), lacking a special relationship with God (67%), and uncaring (62%). In 1980, the public was more likely to rate TV ministers positively than negatively on all these characteristics, with majorities describing televangelists as caring (59%), sincere (56%), and honest (53%). Almost half in 1980 (47%) thought that television evangelists had a special relationship with God.

The television evangelists' sharpest critics are under 50 years of age, college graduates, middle or upper-income adults, residents of the East and whites. Self-described "born-again" or Evangelical Christians and those who watch religious television on a weekly basis are the strongest supporters of the television preachers, although even among these groups it is rare to find a majority describing televangelists in a positive way on any of the five characteristics about which Gallup asked.

Weekly viewers of religious programming have been the least affected by the continuing negative publicity surrounding televangelism. Most of the attitudes of weekly viewers remained constant between 1987 and 1989, with a significant decline registering only for their image of TV ministers' honesty. The most important erosion in attitudes toward television ministers in the last two years has occurred among infrequent viewers of religious television (those who watch, but not in the past week). The attitudes of infrequent viewers now more closely resemble the highly critical attitudes of non-viewers, whereas in 1987 infrequent viewers were much more similar to weekly viewers. Although adults who never watch religious programming on TV have grown somewhat more critical of television preachers in the last two years, they already had a fairly negative opinion of televangelists in 1987.

Who Watches?

Despite the public's negative view of televangelists, the electronic church continues to reach a large audience, although the size of that audience shows signs of erosion. Half of all adults (49%) report that they have watched religious programming on television at least once, and one in five (21%) are considered weekly viewers, having watched religious television in the past seven days. After a period of growth between 1983 and 1987, the number of Americans who have ever tuned in to religious television has stayed at the same level during the past two years. However, the percent of adults who watched religious programming in the past week dropped four percentage points, from 25 to 21 percent, since 1987.

The most loyal viewers are older adults, those with low incomes, without college degrees, and residents of the South. A majority (61%) of weekly viewers are "born-again" Christians. Today as many as one-third (34%) of all adults describe themselves as "born-again" or Evangelical Christians. In fact, Evangelicals outnumber Catholics, who represent one-fourth (26%) of the population. The profile of these Evangelical Christians closely parallels that of the weekly audience for religious television. Among blacks and residents of the South, just over half are "born-again" Christians.

One in twenty (5%) adults, representing roughly 8.5 million Americans, have contributed money to at least one television evangelist in the past year. This is statistically unchanged from the percentage reporting contributions in 1987 (4%). Among those who watch religious programs weekly, 17% have made contributions in the past year. Those most likely to be contributors are often those with the least discretionary income, namely older people, blacks, and those who do not have a high school diploma.

Confidence in the Church Unchanged

The sharp decline in the public's view of television evangelists since 1987 is not reflected in lower evaluations of organized religion as a whole, nor in any change in the role religion plays in adults' lives. Three in ten (30%) Americans say they have a "great deal" of confidence in the Church or organized religion, 22 percent have "quite a lot" of confidence, 26 percent have "some confidence, and 20 percent have "very little" or no confidence at all in the Church. This level of public confidence in the Church and organized religion has remained fairly steady since 1987, when one in three (32%) expressed a great deal of confidence in the Church.

Public confidence in organized religion suffered an earlier setback, between 1985 and 1986, when, for the first time in Gallup's measurements, the Church did not emerge as the institution receiving the highest level of public confidence from among a list of various American institutions that Gallup asked people to rate. In 1985, four in ten (42%) Americans said they had a great deal of confidence in the Church, falling to one in three (34%) by the following year.

Religion is at least as important to adults now as it was in 1987, with a majority (57%) saying that religion is "very important" in their own life. In 1987, 53 percent said that religion was very important. Church membership and attendance remain at essentially the same levels Gallup has observed for two decades, with two in three (67%) Americans belonging to a church or synagogue and 42 percent attending services within the past week.

Survey Methodology

The results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected sample of 1,238 adults, age 18 and older, living in the continental United States. Interviews were conducted during the period September 7 through 10, 1989. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 4 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

I am going to read you some pairs of opposite phrases that have been used to describe television evangelists and ministers. From each pair of opposites, would you select the term you feel best *describes television evangelists or ministers, in general?*

	1980	1987	1989
Trustworthy with money	41	23	16
Not trustworty with money	36	63	79
Don't know	23	14	5
	100%	100%	100%
Honest	53	34	23
Dishonest	26	53	70
Don't know	21	13	7
	100%	100%	100%
Sincere	56	34	26
Insincere	25	51	67
Don't know	19	15	7
	100%	100%	100%
Have special relationship with God	47	30	23
No special relationship with God	33	56	67
Don't know	20	14	10
	100%	100%	100%
Care about people	59	48	33
Don't care	21	38	62
Don't know	20	14	5
	100%	100%	100%

Watch Religious Programs?

Do you ever watch religious programs on television?

In the past 7 days, have you watched any religious programs on television?

	1983	1987	1989
Watch religious TV (total)	42%	49%	49%
Within past 7 days	18	25	21
Not in past 7 days	24	24	28
Don't ever watch religious TV	58	51	51
	100%	100%	100%

Contributed Money?

By any chance, have you contributed money to any television evangelists in the last 12 months?

	1987	1989
Yes, contributed money	4%	5%
No	96	95
	100%	100%

Confidence in American Institutions

I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Would you please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one — a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?

Great deal or lot of confidence in each:	1981	1985	1986	1989
	%	%	%	%
The military	50	61	63	63
The church or organized religion	64	66	57	52
U.S. Supreme Court	46	56	54	46
Public schools	42	48	49	43
Banks	46	51	49	42
Congress	29	39	41	32

Percent of Evangelicals

Would you describe yourself as a "born-again" or Evangelical Christian?

	1989
Yes	34%
No	62
Don't know	4
	100%

Church Membership

Do you happen to be a member of a church or synagogue?

	1987	1989
Yes, member	68%	67%
No	32	67
Don't know	*	1
	100%	100%

Church Attendance

Did you happen to attend a church or synagogue in the last seven days or not?

	1987	1989
Yes, attended in past week	40%	42%
No	60	58
Don't know	*	*
	100%	100%

Importance of Religion

How important would you say religion is in your own life?

	1987	1989
Very important	53%	57%
Fairly important	31	29
Not very important	15	13
No opinion	1	1
	100%	100%

The George H. Gallup International Foundation

The newly formed George H. Gallup International Foundation is a world survey research laboratory for testing new ideas and programs to improve the human condition. The newly formed foundation has been named in memory of Dr. George H. Gallup, Sr., a pioneer in public opinion research, and a strong believer in scientific polling as a way or harnessing the power of public opinon to improve government and enhance the quality of life.

Because no new idea or program will ultimately succeed without public support, a key function of the Foundation is to determine public receptivity to new proposals through quantitative and qualitative surveys. Gallup labelled this kind of research "Public Response Research" and believed that it added a new dimension to the field. He wrote: "The search to find new ideas, new solutions is just as important as the search to discover the division of opinion on the issues of the day."

The Foundation is committed to the proposition that a democracy has nothing to fear — and everything to gain — from the dissemination of findings from carefully conducted public opinion surveys. The Foundation, therefore, will make survey results available to policy makers, students of public policy, private citizens, and others in the decision-making process.

The Foundation also has a strong education role and is dedicated to increasing the level of public awareness and knowledge of scientific polling. In keeping with this role, the Foundation will train organizations and groups to develop their own survey mechanisms.

Initially, the George H. Gallup International Foundation will seek grants in four areas — health, the environment, education, and religion and values.

The Foundation will also serve as a resource and archives center for students of the history of public opinion surveys. George H. Gallup, Jr. will serve as Managing Trustee of the new Foundation.

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